

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Sunday 4 August 2024

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks

Year B Proper 13

Exodus 16.2-4, 9-16; Ephesians 4.1-16; John 6.24-35

I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called (Ephesians 4.1)

Day Nine of the Paris Olympics: We've really loved watching. I'm in awe again especially of gymnastics and synchronised diving. How do you even do that? – if I tried it, I'd break a leg or drown. The grace and beauty and skill, people at the pinnacle of their endeavours, is breathtaking. And all undergirded, of course, by the order and discipline of constant practicing and practicing and practicing.

Here's a glimpse into the way in which my brain goes off at tangents, making connections. All of this brought to mind the musical articulation of God's creative, awesome power – the beauty of human endeavour and the beauty of our mother earth, brought to life in the music of Haydn's Creation. You might be able to picture some of the music in your mind: the recitatives and choruses proclaiming the wonders of his works, all based on a belief in the good ordering of things: 'the heavens are telling the glory of God'.

The trouble with watching the Olympics is that you just see the perfection. You're not always aware of the knobby bits, the bumps along life's road. A couple of the athletes have been very public, haven't they, about the real difficulties in life which they've had. And likewise with the Creation, Haydn stops short of expressing in music the events of The Fall – he doesn't go to Genesis 3, and Adam and Eve, apart from a very passing reference to the 'happy pair' at the end. Haydn's perfect and unsullied Creation, as Vicky Johnson so eloquently puts it in her book 'On Voice'*, is kept in a pre-lapsarian state of grace – before we humans mess it all up. (Perhaps Haydn is offering us a glimpse into the end of time, not ours yet, of final glory and peace where kingdom values reign).

One way of thinking about The Fall and the more difficult side of human nature, is that us humans, represented by Adam and Eve, are no longer solely tuned into the voice of God, but have become enchanted by the sound of our own voice, listening only to ourselves – or those who sound like us – to the detriment of 'the other' and those who speak with a different voice or who look different. And so – in our Judeo-Christian tradition, humanity's travail began, with our human ego getting the better of itself.

Until, that is, we're redeemed by a different song. When another woman, the Blessed Virgin Mary, recognises the voice of God, and brings to birth a new music. The vision in the Magnificat of scattering the proud or egotistical in the imagination of their hearts; exalting the humble; filling the hungry.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Sunday 4 August 2024

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks

Year B Proper 13

Exodus 16.2-4, 9-16; Ephesians 4.1-16; John 6.24-35

It is why Christians down the ages have honoured Mary and her part in our salvation. It's a joy to have Fr Heiner here with us from the Basilica of Our Lady of Kevelaer, twinned with Bury St Edmunds – in advance of Dean Joe and Bishop Martin's visit for the 375th celebrations there of the foundation of the Knadekapel.

What's all this got to do with today's readings?

Listen again to the words of the second reading which Fr Heiner read: St Paul's majestic call to us, you and me:

I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called: humility, gentleness patience, bearing with one another in love; making every effort to maintain unity in the bond of peace.

It's that wholeness of a genuinely human life – personally and corporately – that St Paul reminds us that we're called to.

The section of Ephesians which immediately follows the passage we heard speaks of what happens when we don't do that. Selfishness leads to the breaking down of community, trust, unity.

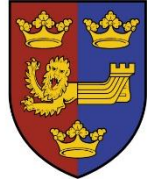
Whereas personal holiness leads to mutual building up and the flourishing of all: it doesn't take much reflection to see where some parts of our society is in all this, and the way in which divisive political language and ideology, driven by big egos and a lust for power and control, have caused so much damage. We've seen it in some of our cities again last night, where anything kindly, thoughtful, kingdom values of inclusive love for all – is written off as 'woke' by some sections of the media.

What about us in all this?

The answer partly lies in today's reading from St John's Gospel. Jesus encourages the crowd (you and me) to see beyond physical food described in Exodus – to the true bread beyond.

When Jesus says that his flesh is true food and his blood is true drink, he is not claiming that he will be changed into physical bread and wine. What he is claiming is that if you want to know what is true food, real food, if you want to know what will give us real life (and for John what is real is what is eternal) then you need to believe in Jesus, receive him, eat of him. It is all the same thing. The bread and the wine, is merely shadow food. Jesus is here claiming that when we receive him by faith we receive the real food.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Sunday 4 August 2024

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks

Year B Proper 13

Exodus 16.2-4, 9-16; Ephesians 4.1-16; John 6.24-35

It is no wonder that people like St Ignatius** were so grabbed by the mystery of it that they called communion 'the medicine of immortality and the antidote which prevents us from dying'.

If we eat this bread and drink this wine, putting our trust in Jesus, in who he is – the Son of Man and the Son of God – and in what he did, receiving Jesus, then we will be changed and we will become more and more like him.

So – just like the Olympians we're seeing on our TVs – or you musicians (thinking of Haydn's Creation again): "Practice makes Perfect". And in our Christian journey of growth we too can be sustained by having a discipline, a rule of life, returning to the altar regularly to be fed and nurtured by the God of our being and our becoming. To recognise and nurture and value the gifts differing that we each receive, that St Paul lists in today's reading.

I leave you with this thought – I love the way in which Dennis McBride*** in his commentary paraphrases this and brings it to life. He says

We're given the gift of compassion because someone somewhere is hurting;

We're given the gift of speech because someone somewhere is dying for the lack of a kind word;

We're given the gift of forgiveness because someone somewhere is trapped in wrong-doing.

These and all God's gifts to us are not for hoarding to ourselves, but are for sharing, and for building each other up in love and care for mutual flourishing of all.

So whatever your passions are – might not be either athletics or Haydn – may our prayer each one be that we may indeed "*strive to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called*".

Philip Banks, August 2024

* On Voice, Victoria Johnson, DLT 2024

** The Augustine Institute: www.faithandculture.com

*** Seasons of the Word, Dennis McBride, Redemptorist Press 1991